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## FOREIGN DEPARTMENT

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### THE LARGEST CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL IN THE WORLD

BY ELIZABETH KNOWLTON

**T**HE largest children's hospital that exists in the world today is not located in New York, or London, or even on the continent of Europe. It stands far away from the main centers of population, in the little war-torn country of Armenia.

On a broad plateau 5,000 feet high, near the foot of snowy Mt. Ararat, lies the town of Alexandropol, and in its outskirts the Near East Relief maintains a city of orphans. This American organization which gives food, clothes, medical aid, and help in reconstruction to the destitute peoples of the Near East, is supporting altogether over a hundred thousand youngsters, who without it would die of starvation. Of these, some twenty thousand are housed in the gray stone buildings, formerly Russian barracks, which cluster on the bare plain outside Alexandropol. Here forty buildings, accommodating six thousand, are set apart as a hospital, the largest children's hospital in the world, to care for the child victims of trachoma.

Trachoma, that virulent eye disease, "as old as the Nile," has always existed in the Near East. The dust and flies of the hot, dry countries have spread it, and there has been no knowledge of sanitation to check it. The native treatments consist of tying bright colored beads to the hair, rubbing the affected eyes with a sacred stone, or other procedure equally unscientific and less pleasant.

During the last few years, the refugee life of most of the people, with its overcrowding in caves and tents and rude shelters, and its weakening of resistance by undernourishment, has made this disease almost universal. Dr. R. T. Uhls, an American eye specialist under the Near East Relief, in examining 30,000 refugees, found 90 per cent suffering with trachoma.

To prevent the Armenia of the future from being a nation of the blind, the Near East Relief maintains everywhere trachoma hospitals and clinics for adults and children. The largest of these is the huge isolation city at Alexandropol.

Deciding on the need for such a hospital was simple,—getting it ready for occupancy was quite another matter. There stood the forty stone buildings, given by the Armenian government, with strong solid walls, but with leaking roofs and not a door or window or bit of woodwork left intact. Near by was the town of Alexandropol, full of starving refugees, able to supply an infinite amount of labor,

but almost nothing in the way of materials. To get things into condition in Armenia was not a question, as it would be in America, of stepping to the telephone and ordering so many doors and window frames, so many mattresses and blankets. But soon 400 refugees under American supervision were at work repairing the buildings. Very ingenious they showed themselves at making something out of nothing, straightening pieces of bent tin for roofing, improvising window catches out of lengths of wire; and one by one the buildings were made ready. To prepare the 3,000 mattresses, 10,000 sheets, and other equipment necessary for the first group of 3,000,—a women's industrial shop was started. There was no trouble finding workers. The woman who went to open it writes: "When I got off my horse I was nearly torn to bits. The women threw themselves on their knees, clutched at my skirts, kissed my hands, and with tears rolling down their cheeks, begged for work."

Other needs of large-scale communal life were supplied by the installation of a central bath, a central bakery, and a central dining room. This last feeds relays of a thousand children at a time, with neatness and dispatch, and is graphically described as "the Armenian Childs." The menu is simple, but has proved itself adjusted to keeping the youngsters in fat and rosy health. The main articles of diet are cocoa and bread, supplemented by corn grits, rice, vegetables, and oil, with meat three times a week and a little sugar.



TURKISH AND ARMENIAN NURSES AT "SEVERSKY POST," THE TRACHOMA HOSPITAL AT ALEXANDROPOL

Under the superintendence of American trained nurses, the nursing force is made up of Russian and Armenian Sisters. These nationalities, it is reported, make very good nurses, deft, clever, and eager to work. There is an immense amount to be done, for the children are given treatments anywhere from once a day to once an hour, and frequently operations are also necessary. These are not the dreaded events to the youngsters that might be expected, so fascinated are they with looking at the many bright instruments of the operating room, and receiving the undivided attention of the doctors and nurses. In fact, one small boy burst into loud sobs on being told that he would not need an operation!

The treatment generally adopted consists of irrigating the eyes with a weak solution of potassium permanganate. Then copper sulphate, silver nitrate, protagol, or argyrol, etc., is used, as the case may require. The children have their own nick-names for the different treatments. "Are they putting 'stone' on your eyes?" one small boy compares notes with another. "They're rubbing mine with 'wood'."

Only about two hundred of the children, the most serious and the surgical cases, are kept in bed. The others live the normal life of all the orphanage children, with school work of sorts that they can do with dimmed eyesight, and industrial work, sewing, weaving, carpentering, and shoemaking. This spring, under the instruction of an American agricultural expert, they are helping on a truck farm with which it is hoped to supply with vegetables all the twenty thousand children at Alexandropol. There is also plenty of time for play. When the children are first rescued, they seem to have forgotten how, and stand around, silent and pathetic, but a few weeks of healthy, happy life help them to forget, and soon they join eagerly in the native and American games and dances.

So life at the trachoma hospital goes on, not at all drearily. It is hoped that eventually most of the little patients will be cured. Every month sees a few discharged, but with the present method of treatment a cure sometimes takes as long as two years, and this disease cannot be attacked scientifically, through its fundamental causes, for they are not yet known. "Send to these suffering children," begs the eye specialist in charge of the hospital, "a research worker with the power to discover the cause of trachoma."

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#### WHAT SHE COULD BE

Two tots were recently overheard discussing their plans for the future.

"What are you going to be when you get big?" asked one.

"Well, I am not going to be married and I am not going to be an old maid," was the reply.

"You will have to be one or the other," said the first.

"I won't either," was the rejoinder. "I guess I can be a nurse."